

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Thailand and Malaysia: Counterinsurgency Operations [redacted]

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Summary

After a four-year break, Thailand last December renewed joint military operations with Malaysia against Malaysian Communist guerrilla bases in southern Thailand. The cooperation is limited, however, and both countries' troops have remained on their respective sides of the border during these new operations. But Bangkok's willingness to cooperate appears to signal the beginning of a long-term effort to control southern Thailand's most bothersome insurgent problem. [redacted]

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Renewed Joint Operations

The Thai and Malaysian Armies last winter began a series of joint military operations aimed at dislodging Malaysian Communist guerrillas from their longtime sanctuaries in southern Thailand. The first action was launched on 28 December, when

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1,000 Thai Army troops and paramilitary rangers conducted a two-week operation against the Communist Party of Malaya's* 12th Regiment in the central border's eastern Betong salient. One thousand Malaysian troops acted as a blocking force on their side of the border. The effort, controlled by a joint headquarters in southern Thailand, resulted in the seizure of several camps. []

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A second joint operation, from 15 April to 6 May, was directed against Communist Party of Malaya/Marxist-Leninist guerrillas in western Betong. Again, Thai Army troops, rangers, and police conducted a sweep with Malaysian troops providing the blocking force on their side of the border. In addition, Thai troops were supported by airstrikes from aircraft participating in a simultaneous joint air exercise. Three major guerrilla camps were captured. []

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Cooperation and Confrontation

Cooperation over the past two decades between the Thai and the Malaysians--and thus Bangkok's control over Thailand's southern provinces--has been difficult to achieve. The southern provinces contain a large ethnic Malay Muslim minority--in four provinces actually a majority--that identifies more with the Malays to the south than with the overwhelmingly Buddhist, Sino-Thai speaking ethnic Thai majority to the north. Tensions between these two communal groups have often resulted in violence. []

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In 1959, the two countries created a Joint Senior Staff Committee to formulate policy and a Joint Border Operations Committee to plan operations.** []

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[] Under the terms of a border agreement signed in 1977, troops could penetrate up to 15 miles inside their neighbor's border in "hot pursuit" of guerrillas or other armed groups. []

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In practice, the Malaysians most often mounted such operations. Residents in the Thai border provinces demonstrated against such Malaysian troop forays, and in January 1980 the operations abruptly ended following a series of incidents

*The Communist Party of Malaya split into three factions in 1970. The largest kept the original name--Communist Party of Malaya--and is the only one officially recognized by Beijing. The other two--the Communist Party of Malaya/Marxist-Leninist and the Communist Party of Malaya/Revolutionary Faction--are smaller but more aggressive. These two groups announced their merger as the Communist Party of Malaysia on 5 December 1983. []

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**These committees changed names in 1965 to General Border Committee (meeting annually) and Regional Border Committee (meeting semiannually). []

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involving Malaysian troops and Thai civilians. Any hopes of renewing cooperation evaporated with the arrival in 1981 of a new Thai 4th Army Region commander, Lieutenant General Han Linanon. Han, a native southerner, echoed the resentment of many Thai officers, who considered their Malaysian counterparts arrogant and condescending and believed that the Malaysians operating inside Thailand were behaving like garrison troops. []

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During the next two years, the Thai military and police conducted unilateral counterinsurgency operations, including sweeps against Thai Communists and dissident Muslims--targets that the Malaysians had been unwilling to consider. These unilateral sweeps are continuing: the latest--involving 2,000 Army troops--started 26 May. []

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A Change of Heart

Thailand's decision to resume joint operations was in part a result of a change in command of the Thai 4th Army. Han was replaced last October by Lieutenant General Wanchai Chitchamnon, who according to the US Embassy, considered Han unnecessarily confrontational in his dealings with the Malaysians. Wanchai abandoned Han's demand that Kuala Lumpur, in exchange for Thai participation in operations against the Malaysian Communists, first agree to joint operations against Thailand's Muslim separatists. Furthermore, unlike Han--who clearly intended to pursue a political career based on a southern constituency--Wanchai appeared willing to take southern Thai criticism by demonstrating his openness to cooperation with the Malaysians. []

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Another reason for Thai willingness to cooperate may be the decline of the Thai Communist insurgency in the north and northeast. Massive defections during the past two years have reduced the Communist threat in these two regions and focused attention on the south, which now has the largest concentration of armed dissidents in the country. According to Thai estimates, the south is home to 1,000 to 2,000 Malaysian Communists, 300-400 Muslim separatists, 700 Thai Communist insurgents, and an uncounted number of smugglers, bandits, and pirates. In addition, Thai officials believe that the Malaysian Communists may be developing closer relations with Thai Communist elements in the south. []

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Finally, Thai Muslim separatist activity--a major irritant in bilateral relations--has waned. Ironically, according to the US Embassy, Han's policy of combining social reforms with military action is largely responsible. Instead of opposing Muslim cultural activities as they often had in the past, Thai officials now not only tolerate but support them; the most recent occasion being the 4th Army's sponsorship this February of a three-day religious meeting that attracted over 100,000 Muslims. This new policy, and the Malaysian government defense of Bangkok's treatment of its Muslim minority at such

international forums as the Islamic Conference earlier this year, has lessened Bangkok's concern about a potential minority problem and its suspicions of official Malaysian connivance with the separatists. [redacted]

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More Pressure--Less Animosity

We expect the joint operations to continue. But although the Malaysians probably will provide [redacted] support if the operations are successful, we do not see a return to the massive, crossborder sweeps of 1977-80 for several reasons:

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- Southern Thai politicians, who dominate the Democrat Party, a member of Thailand's ruling coalition, would worry that large Malaysian incursions might provoke a popular reaction against the government that would undermine the party's political base.
- Malaysia no longer considers the Malaysian Communists as great a security threat as it did in 1977-80.
- The present coordinated operations, while not producing spectacular results, seem to be considered effective enough by both governments to lessen the need to adopt combined operations. [redacted]

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As a result, the insurgent problem will not soon be eliminated. But if the joint operations do prove effective enough to force the Malaysian Communists out of their border hideaways, the most formidable group of armed dissidents inside Thailand will be seriously weakened, making Bangkok's control over the border area the strongest it has been in many years. [redacted]

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The Thai military initially hoped that the Malaysian Communists would crack as their Thai counterparts did once the Army put on the pressure. There have, however, been few defectors from the Malaysian insurgents and a Thai offer of lenient surrender terms has been virtually ignored. Guerrillas of the Communist Party of Malaya/Marxist-Leninist, in fact, have demonstrated their willingness to counterpunch and have inflicted casualties on the Thai government troops harrasing them. Moreover, the rugged jungle terrain of the border area makes it difficult to locate and engage the guerrillas except on their own terms. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, these operations--and the increased non-military pressure on the insurgents (four districts in southernmost Yala Province are now subject to tight controls over the importation of medicines and food, and local businesses are being required to submit biographies on their employees)--will disrupt the smuggling, robberies, and terrorist activity in the border area. [redacted]

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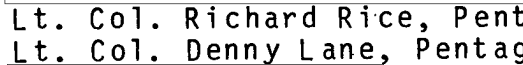
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